CULTURAL eMAGAZINE
INKOCHI
FIRST OF ITS KIND FROM KERALA

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Issue
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INTRODUCING
Dr. Arya Gopi

INDIANS - Review
BACURAU - Review
Elementa 2.0 - Art Show
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The Mysteries of the Female Body

Fabric Art

By
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Editor's NOTE

Special Note

This special issue of the restarted INKochi Magazine is dedicated to celebrating women. In honour of International Women's Day, which takes place on March 8th, we are featuring a collection of articles predominantly authored by talented women from various fields. These pieces highlight their unique perspectives, achievements, and the challenges they continue to navigate. We invite you to explore and appreciate their incredible contributions to our community and beyond. Thank you for joining us in this celebration of women's voices and stories!

A New Move on the Board

Welcome to the 2026 March issue of **INKochi Magazine**.

If the name **'INKochi'** stirs memories of the melodic roll of dice and the strategic intrigue of an ancient board game, you'll find our restart beautifully reflective of that spirit. After a brief period of reflection and recalibration, we are excited to return to the table, not just to resume our previous discussions, but to boldly redefine the parameters of our dialogue with fresh insights and perspectives.

Starting this March, INKochi will evolve into a vibrant monthly journey. Our mission remains ambitious: to intricately weave a tapestry of the human experience that celebrates a diverse array of topics, from the tactile beauty and intricate craftsmanship of Ephemera and Crafts to the impressive structural elegance found within Architecture, Art and Education.

What to Expect Each Month

We firmly believe that culture is not a monolith but a rich and multifaceted tapestry, an exquisite collection of historical whispers and contemporary echoes reverberating through time. Each issue will offer a deep dive into:

The Arts: Immerse yourself in the vibrant world of painting, where colours dance on canvas, and explore the intricate craftsmanship found in various crafts and sculptures. Delight in the exquisite beauty of mudras in dance, where each gesture tells a story, and experience the profound emotions that resonate through the soul-stirring ragas of music. Let captivating movies transport you to fantastical realms, and witness the dynamic performances in plays, where the stage comes alive with energy and passion, igniting the imagination and stirring the heart.

The Written Word: We will dedicate a space that celebrates the written word in all its glory, featuring Literature that spans genres, poignant Fiction, illuminating Prose, evocative Narrative, stirring Poetry, and in-depth Book reviews that invite exploration of new worlds and ideas.

contd...

CULTURAL eMAGAZINE

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Editor's NOTE

The Roots: Join us as we peel back the layers of History and Heritage, uncovering the narratives that have shaped our cultures and communities, allowing us to connect more deeply with our shared ancestry.

The Experience: Embark on sensory journeys through the captivating flavours of Cuisine that showcase regional diversity, invite wanderlust through enchanting Travel stories, and feel the vibrancy and richness of Festivals that bring communities together in celebration.

A Love Letter to Kerala and Beyond

While our curiosity knows no borders, our heart is firmly planted in the rich soil of India. We explore the diverse cultural landscapes of Kochi, the lush heritage of Malabar, and the storied past of Travancore through a lens that appreciates their unique tales. Whether it's a breathtaking architectural gem nestled in a quaint Kerala street or an overlooked historical narrative pulsating with life from the heart of the subcontinent, we are dedicated to unearthing and sharing these captivating stories.

Looking Back to Move Forward

For those eager to revisit our earlier chapters or discover our prior issues, our journey is preserved for you in the vault of our archives. You can access the complete collection through the magazine's "ARCHIVE" link, ensuring that every story remains within reach.

Thank you for joining us for this exciting new season. The dice have been rolled, the board is set, and we are genuinely thrilled to have you as part of this unfolding narrative.

Cheers,

Varghese T. Thomas
Editor/Publisher
INKochi Magazine

Abin Joseliph

Kochi's Bird-friendly College Campuses

The sprawling campuses of Kochi are proving to be more than just centres of academic excellence; they are thriving sanctuaries for birdlife. Recent Campus Bird Counts (CBC) conducted at Maharaja's College and Sacred Heart College, Kochi, Kerala, have highlighted the remarkable biodiversity present within these urban green spaces.

Maharaja's College: A Growing List of Residents

On 2026 February 13th, the Bhoomithrasena and Nature Club of Maharaja's College organised a three-hour bird count. Under my leadership, with the coordination of Associate Professor Dr. Shanthi Vasudevan C.N. and Assistant Professor Dr. Ajith Kumar T.G. from the Botany Department, the team identified 38 species in a single morning.

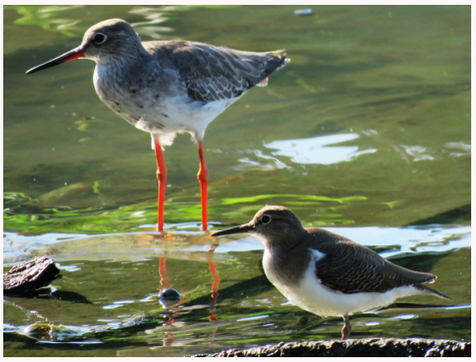
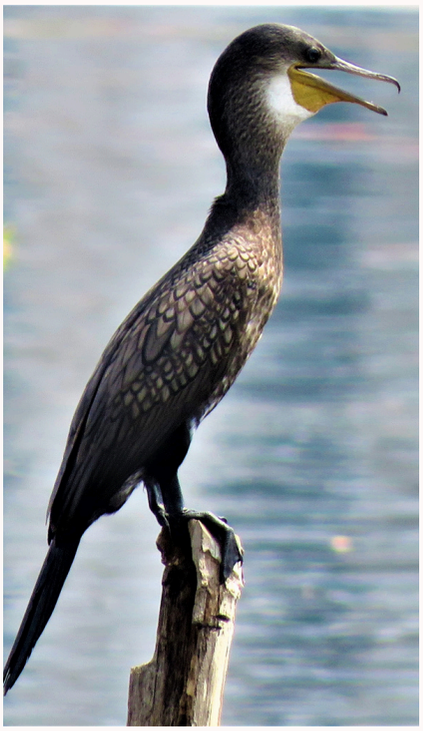
The survey saw enthusiastic participation from faculty and students, including Assistant Professor Smt. Sharmila P.S. (Zoology) and a dedicated student team consisting of Anamika, Hamida, Rifa, Sreenanda, Shadiya, Sreelakshmi, Vismaya, Hansha, Amaljith, and Ansil.

This follows a similar survey I led in 2023, which recorded 33 species. Combined, these efforts have now confirmed a total of 42 bird species on the Maharaja's campus.

Spotted in the Canopy:

Among the sightings were migratory winter visitors, such as the Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Barn Swallow, Indian Golden Oriole, Clamorous Reed-warbler, and Blyth's Reed-warbler.

Resident species dominated the count in terms of numbers, specifically the House Crow, Rock Pigeon, Asian Koel, Black Kite, Pale-billed Flowerpecker, and Purple-rumped Sunbird. My observations suggest that, while crows, pigeons, and kites are staples of urban ecosystems, the dense foliage of fruit-bearing and flowering trees at Maharaja's is what specifically attracts the Koels, Flowerpeckers, and Sunbirds.

Sacred Heart College: A Waterfront Wonderland

Across city at Sacred Heart College (SH), the numbers are even more impressive. Between 2019 and 2020, six bird counts led by the former Principal and me, Dr. Prasanth Palakkappillil—a keen bird enthusiast—identified 60 species.

The momentum continued this February 13th. Under the coordination of Abhay K.V., a team including Assistant Professor Smt. Gayathri S., Student Development Officer, Sri. Sooraj P.R., and several students (Amal, Ann Mary, Rahul, Alan, Georgy, Krishnakant, Joyal, and Sidharth) spotted over 40 bird varieties. To date, I have confirmed the presence of 65 bird species at SH College, of which 15 are winter migrants.

Frequent Migrants: Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Indian Roller, Asian Palm-swift, Indian Swiftlet, Common Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Whiskered Tern, Glossy Ibis, Barn Swallow, Indian Golden Oriole, Rosy Starling, Clamorous Reed-warbler, and Blyth's Reed-warbler.

New Arrivals: This year, the Black-winged Stilt and Wood Sandpiper were recorded on campus for the first time.

The defining feature of SH College's biodiversity is its high concentration of water birds. The proximity to Vembanad Lake and the lush mangroves lining the shore create an irresistible habitat for aquatic species.

The Ecological Balance

Birds play a crucial role in maintaining the equilibrium of urban ecosystems. These campus bird-watching programs do more than collect data; they offer students a unique opportunity for nature education and mental rejuvenation amidst their academic lives. By protecting these green spaces, our colleges are ensuring that Kochi remains a habitable home for all its residents—winged or otherwise.

Abin Joseliph
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Post Graduate and Research Department of Zoology,
Sacred Heart College,Thevara,
Kochi, Kerala, India.

movie REVIEW

A PERSPECTIVE FROM KERALA

Rupesh Kumar

This film prompted me to reconsider the memories, thoughts, lives, struggles, and celebrations of the people in those communities through a different lens.

No other film has provided me with such a powerful experience to date as "Bacurau."

It is estimated that there are approximately twenty-six thousand Dalit colonies in Kerala. These colonies are rarely documented in cultural history, public records, or official accounts. However, their histories are beginning to resurface in Kerala. Cultural feudalism has marginalised these areas, often portraying and conceptualising them as uncivilised. The rise of social media is changing the perception of these colonies, particularly in the post-digital era, as more attention is drawn to their existence. Although historical records about these places exist, there remains a societal reluctance to acknowledge them publicly.

During the COVID era, many began to reprocess their memories in various ways. It was during this time that I first watched the Portuguese/Brazilian film "Bacurau." In the context of reprocessing memories, "Bacurau" subverts traditional notions of memory. After watching the film, I reflected on my experiences in the Dalit colonies, Kannur district, where I grew up.

Beyond the widespread poverty often depicted in public discourse in Kerala and the political slogans associated with these colonies, "Bacurau" offered me a new perspective. This film prompted me to reconsider the memories, thoughts, lives, struggles, and celebrations of the people in those communities through a different lens.

My father's homeland resembled the northern Brazilian village of Bacurau. This land, once a swampy agricultural slave colony, was isolated from the main villages of Kerala. The only visitors were the occasional postman who came once >>

movie REVIEW

A PERSPECTIVE FROM KERALA

a year, Muslim girls who visited to ask for 'unniappam' during the Onam festival, a few left-wing politicians, and the local landlords. Years later, a kilometre-long road has been constructed, which eventually connected our colony to the town. It was a world much like Bacurau, but ours was a swampy land, with the prevalence of casteism, bordered by a river, which was the main difference.

There is a captivating scene in "Bacurau" where men and women bathe together. This group bathing practice aims to conserve water during a ten-year drought. Similarly, in our country, when the river water becomes clean during the monsoon, everyone comes together to wash and bathe, reflecting our shared practices. This film made me realise that the gatherings in northern Brazil resemble our own. The wars, droughts, community rituals, and violence depicted in "Bacurau" mirror the lives of Dalit people living in the salt marshes of North Malabar. While the locals in "Bacurau" face neo-capitalism, we must confront the present structure - "common Kerala."

The geography of Bacurau is easily recognisable to other Dalit communities in Kerala. We also see a similar global landscape in the Tamil Nadu film "Koozhangal." Both films depict vast areas affected by drought. In "Bacurau," a scene that shows a decade without rain presents images of bushes, tanker trucks delivering water, bullets striking them, and murders—these portrayals echo the realities seen in many villages across Indian society, highlighting both similarities and differences.

This film represents a dualistic war between neo-capitalism and the indigenous community in a land where mining and the state continuously encroach on their territory. In their efforts to defend their land, community members have created a sense of distance for themselves. At the same time, Bacurau seems to disappear from the map, symbolising the erasure of the lives of those in the colonies from the cultural landscape of progressive Kerala. The old man playing the guitar in "Bacurau" represents the indigenous joy that their community cultivates. Similarly, there is a brothel where they gather to celebrate. However, the drone—an instrument of neo-capitalism—carries out surveillance and records the murders occurring in the village. >>

movie REVIEW

A PERSPECTIVE FROM KERALA

The old man playing the guitar in "Bacurau" represents the indigenous joy that their community cultivates. Similarly, there is a brothel where they gather to celebrate.

After globalisation and the onset of the post-digital era, the colonies of Kerala have gained new visibility. This represents a fundamental contradiction between "Bacurau" and Kerala. While "Bacurau" portrays a stark battle, the subalterns of Kerala have often pursued development along their own paths, despite various political groups attempting to claim their legacy.

What is both shocking and exhilarating in this film is its portrayal of violence by the indigenous people. They break free from moral stigmas and theories against violence, retaliating against the invaders with lethal force.

The scene featuring the elderly couple attacking the invaders is particularly striking in cinematic history. Their response mirrors Vietnam's resistance to American aggression, as they force the invaders into the roles of perpetrators, murderers, and burial workers. Similarly, in Kerala, there have been micro-wars against feudalism, albeit without firearms in the colonies. However, these subaltern conflicts have yet to be fully recognised in the narratives of Left-Naxalite "revolutionary histories."

"Bacarau" creates a unique visual language that celebrates the complexities of indigenous resistance within a challenging geographical landscape. The act of taking up arms, confronting and burying the invaders, and sending the mayor off on a donkey embodies a form of political beauty.

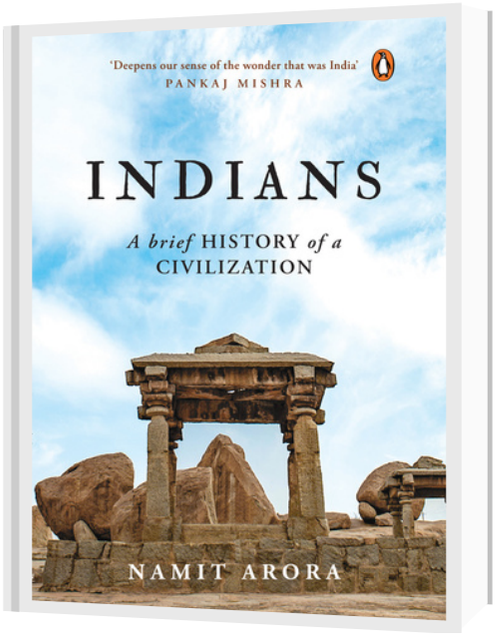
The film establishes a war against neo-capitalism that presents a thoroughly dualistic perspective. It also inspires new filmmakers to capture visuals from diverse parts of the world. The narrative questions the conventional heroism often assigned to indigenous people who resort to violence. Not only in its political themes but also through the geography depicted in the film, the bodies of the people, the guns they wield, the soil beneath their feet, and the violence itself all emerge as significant characters. This film fuses politics and beauty, opening the door to new possibilities. <>

Reviewed by: Rupesh Kumar
Original text in Malayalam

Translated by:
Varghese Thomas
Editor/Publisher/INKochi

book REVIEW

Source: Namit Arora



What do we really know about the Aryan migration theory and why is that debate so hot? Why did the people of Khajuraho carve erotic scenes on temple walls? What did the monks at Nalanda eat for dinner? Did our ideals of beauty ever prefer dark skin?

Indian civilization is an idea, a reality, an enigma. In this riveting book, Namit Arora takes us on an unforgettable journey through 5000 years of history, reimagining in rich detail the social and cultural moorings of Indians through the ages. Drawing on credible sources, he discovers what inspired and shaped them: their political upheavals and rivalries, customs and vocations, and a variety of unusual festivals.

Arora makes a stop at six iconic places—the Harappan city of Dholavira, the Ikshvaku capital at Nagarjunakonda, the Buddhist centre of learning at Nalanda, enigmatic Khajuraho, Vijayanagar at Hampi, and historic Varanasi—enlivening the narrative with vivid descriptions, local stories and evocative photographs. Punctuating this are chronicles of famous travellers who visited India—including Megasthenes, Xuanzang, Alberuni and Marco Polo—whose dramatic and idiosyncratic tales conceal surprising insights about our land.

In lucid, elegant prose, Arora explores the exciting churn of ideas, beliefs and values of our ancestors through millennia —some continue to shape modern India, while others have been lost forever. An original, deeply engaging and extensively researched work, Indians illuminates a range of histories coursing through our veins.

Praise for the BOOK

"Namit Arora brings an enquiring mind, a clear head and a light touch to bear on a miscellany of Indian history's foundational texts and most significant sites. Indians is illuminating, absorbing and a joy to read. I defy anyone to peruse it and not feel richly rewarded by its insights."

—John Keay, India: A History, The Spice Route

"Namit Arora is one of the most acute observers of contemporary India, and in his new book he extends his gaze to the past. Resourcefully researched and elegantly written, Indians deepens our sense of the wonder that was India."

—Pankaj Mishra, Age of Anger, An End to Suffering

It takes a remarkable feat of insightful writing to cover such a long period within a single volume while also avoiding a top-down perspective. An easy, entertaining and engaging book."

—Tony Joseph, Early Indians

Web Series REVIEW

INDIANS
Now A History Web Series
in 10 episodes
Research, Script and Narration
By Namit Arora

View on YouTube
thru the links below

The story of India is one of profound and continuous change. It has been shaped by the dynamic of migration, conflict, mixing, coexistence, and cooperation. In this ten-part web series, I'll tell the story of Indians and our civilization by exploring some of our greatest historical sites, most of which were lost to memory and were dug out by archaeologists.

Sites like the Harappan city of Dholavira, Mauryan Pataliputra, the Ikshvaku capital at Nagarjunakonda, the Buddhist centre of learning at Nalanda, enigmatic Khajuraho, Vijayanagar at Hampi, Delhi of the Mughals, and historic Varanasi.

I'll also focus on ancient and medieval foreign travellers, such as Megasthenes, Xuanzang, Alberuni, Marco Polo, François Bernier and others, whose idiosyncratic accounts conceal surprising insights about us Indians. All along, I'll survey India's long and exciting churn of cultural ideas, beliefs, and values—some that still shape us today, and others that have been lost forever.

Episode 1:The Harappans

Episode 2:The Aryans and the Vedic Age

Episode 3:The Mauryans and Megasthenes

Episode 4:The Ikshvakus of Andhra Pradesh

Episode 5:Nalanda and the Decline of Buddhism

Episode 6:Khajuraho and the World of Tantra

Episode 7:Alberuni and Marco Polo in India

Episode 8:The Vijayanagar Empire

Episode 9:The Mughals and Bernier

Episode 10:The Faiths of Varanasi

My hope is to advance a fresh understanding of our past that's rooted in sound scholarship, while illuminating some of the most consequential trends, transformations and fault lines of Indian civilization. The series mostly mirrors—and often extends—the contents of my book, Indians: A Brief History of a Civilization, and uses carefully curated visuals to illustrate my story. Each episode has a bibliography and transcript below. Go ahead and watch! —Namit Arora <>

FINDING BEAUTY IN WHAT REMAINS...

By Annie Smitha

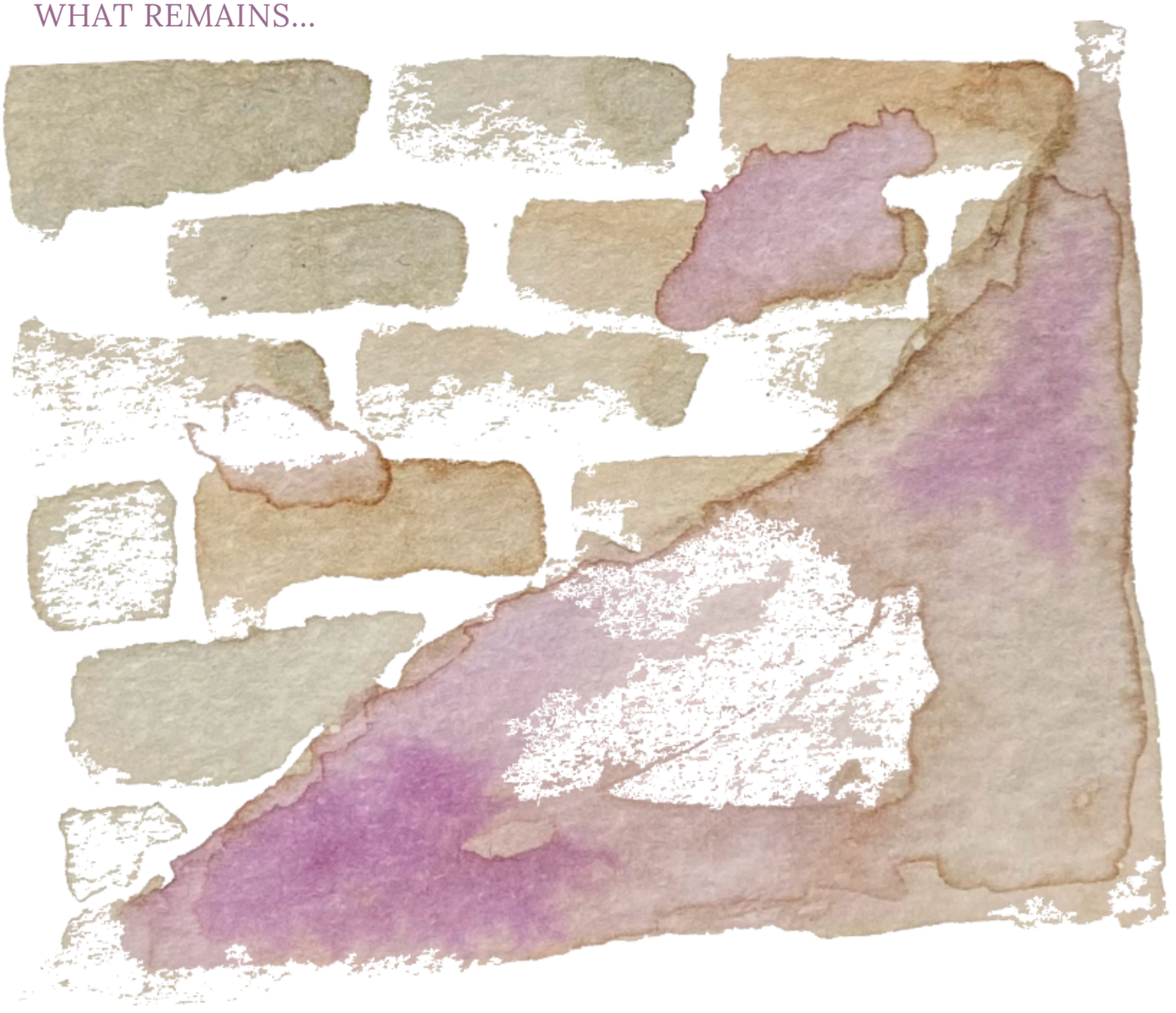
Everything around us follows a pattern, though not always scaled to perfection. Moss spreads across stone in uneven patches, mangroves take root along the banks of the backwaters, and the flight of birds' forms shapes that exist only for a moment before dissolving. What looks irregular often carries its own order. Nature is not rigid; it defines and brings identity.

There is another kind of order—the trimmed and corrected kind. In ornamental gardens, hedges are shaved into precise forms. Paths are measured; nothing spills beyond its edge. This arrangement feels reassuring because it appears controlled. It suggests that nothing unexpected will occur. >>

FINDING BEAUTY IN WHAT REMAINS...

A forest does not behave that way. Roots extend wherever they can. Vines shift toward light; leaves overlap without instruction, adjusting balance constantly. Nothing remains fixed in nature. Everything responds in its own way, carrying a quiet claim to uniqueness. What seems untidy from a distance reveals, on closer attention, a pattern shaped by circumstance rather than command. >>

FINDING BEAUTY IN WHAT REMAINS...



I grew up in a version of Fort Kochi that looks different today. Before repainting and careful restoration, surfaces carried time openly. From faded paint on walls to rusted iron gates and the shaky planks of wooden staircases, nothing seemed corrected. It simply stood as it had become.

As a child, I sat on the wide expanse of beach, watching the waves roll in and noticing the tiny burrows punctuating the sand with delicate tunnels. Unlike other children, I preferred to observe rather than play. I traced the sometimes-slow and sometimes-quick sweep of water across the shore, marvelling at how each tide reshaped the sand.

The Chinese fishing nets rise and dip, working in alliance with the tide. Their ropes strained, their beams weathered. I never thought of these as imperfections but sensed them to be more real than anything newly finished.

Recently, walking through Hampi gave me the same feeling I remembered from childhood. The remains of the once-mighty Vijayanagar Empire were not undone by time alone; they were shattered by human will. And yet they endure, with stone monuments existing in changed textures, their surfaces darkened by heat and rain. The structures had not remained as they were first built. >>

ILLUSTRATIONS
By Ribika Basu

Ribika Basu is an architect who enjoys exploring diverse forms of art and creative expression. Her curiosity for visual storytelling has led her to work behind the scenes in the art department of a few advertisement films, and to gain experience in filmmaking as an assistant director on a short film.

She has a natural inclination toward hands-on creative projects and has also shared her passion for the arts by teaching Kathak dance for a period of time. Alongside her artistic pursuits, she finds great joy in spending time with animals.

Besides, she is also a part of INKochi Magazine.

FINDING BEAUTY IN WHAT REMAINS...

They had continued. Their present form included everything they had endured. The longer something exists, the less it resembles its original outline.

We are often taught to admire precision—straight lines, even colour, clean edges. Precision suggests mastery. Nothing is allowed to deviate. Yet lived structures do not stay precise. They gather marks that cannot be reversed without erasing evidence of use. Perhaps this is why smoothness appeals to us: it reassures us that change can be managed or hidden. In contrast, visible wear reminds us that nothing remains untouched. It reflects vulnerability.

We live in a world of filters. Images are edited until textures disappear, light adjusted, colour balanced, lines straightened. The signs of time's growth and ageing are removed. What remains looks uniform. It feels controlled, but it also feels distant from lived experience.

Over the years, I have begun to see things beyond buildings and landscapes. Lives follow a similar pattern. Plans shift, edges soften, certainties blur. What remains is not the original design but the form shaped by experience. If we expect permanence, we are disappointed. If we allow change, we begin to notice continuity instead. What survives is not what remained untouched, but what adapted without losing itself.

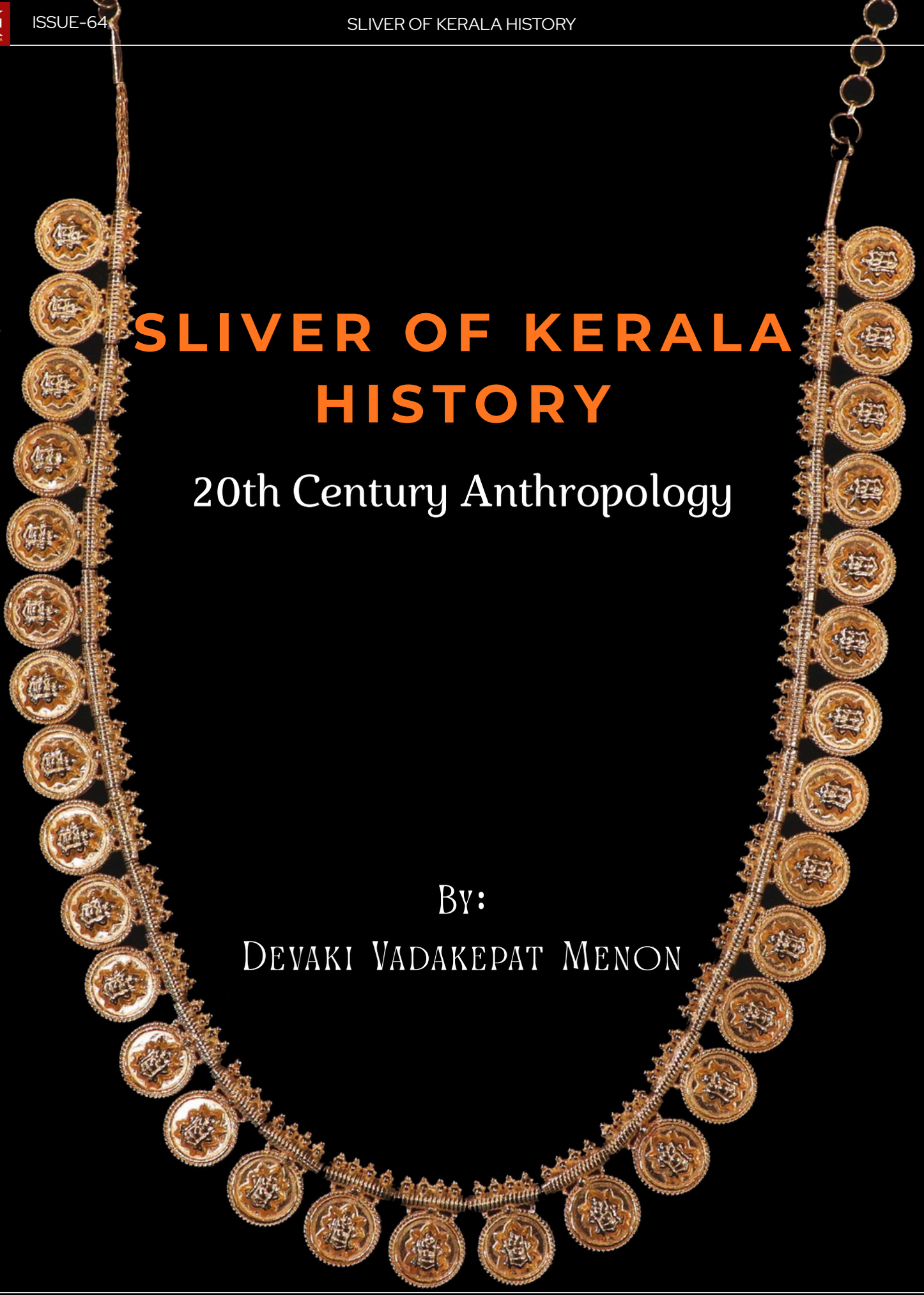
And that quiet continuity is its own kind of beauty.

WRITER'S PROFILE

Annie Smitha P. T. is an educator and writer associated with SOBHA ICON, a CSR initiative of SOBHA Limited. Her writing engages with science, arts, culture, and heritage, often taking the form of reflective essays and conversations with eminent personalities.

She is also a TED-Ed Student Talks Facilitator, interested in nurturing thoughtful dialogue and young voices.

Besides, she is also a part of INKochi Magazine.



SLIVER OF KERALA HISTORY

20th Century Anthropology

By:
Devaki Vadakepat Menon

SLIVER OF KERALA HISTORY

20th Century Anthropology

Contextualising Colonial Anthropology and L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer's Photographs

Ethnography, the study of human cultures encompassing social behaviours, worldviews, beliefs, and material culture, has evolved dramatically from its colonial origins. As anthropology's primary research method, it now takes forms ranging from research-subject-led collaborations to visual methods combining film and photography. In its origins, however, ethnography was primarily a written practice, deeply entangled with the administrative aims of British imperial expansion.

PLATES XIV & XV.

FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY DR. SIMPSON.

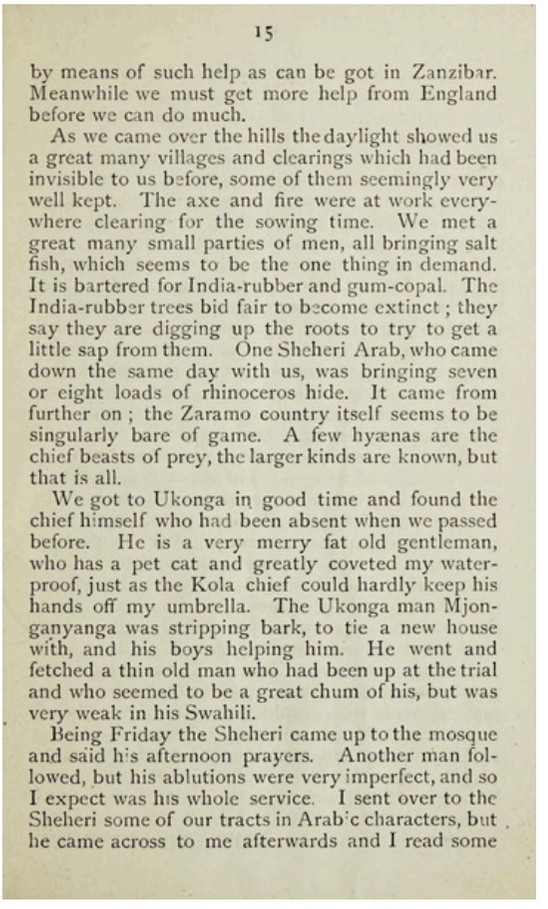
MUNDAS OF CHUTIA NAGPUR, MALE AND FEMALE.

The above are Mundas of villages close to Ranchi, the capital of the Province of Chutia Nagpur, who living with Oraons have adopted their style of decoration. They are good typical representatives of the race, though not handsome specimens. They show the breadth of face and obliquity of eye, which affirm the north-eastern origin ascribed to them.

NOTE.—The Mundas are now generally classed as Dravidians and the theory of their 'north-eastern origin' has been abandoned.

H. H. R.

Excerpt from Herbert Hope Risley's People of India, 1915.



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by means of such help as can be got in Zanzibar. Meanwhile we must get more help from England before we can do much.

As we came over the hills the daylight showed us a great many villages and clearings which had been invisible to us before, some of them seemingly very well kept. The axe and fire were at work everywhere clearing for the sowing time. We met a great many small parties of men, all bringing salt fish, which seems to be the one thing in demand. It is bartered for India-rubber and gum-copal. The India-rubber trees bid fair to become extinct; they say they are digging up the roots to try to get a little sap from them. One Sheheri Arab, who came down the same day with us, was bringing seven or eight loads of rhinoceros hide. It came from further on; the Zaramo country itself seems to be singularly bare of game. A few hyænas are the chief beasts of prey, the larger kinds are known, but that is all.

We got to Ukonga in good time and found the chief himself who had been absent when we passed before. He is a very merry fat old gentleman, who has a pet cat and greatly coveted my waterproof, just as the Kola chief could hardly keep his hands off my umbrella. The Ukonga man Mjonganyanga was stripping bark, to tie a new house with, and his boys helping him. He went and fetched a thin old man who had been up at the trial and who seemed to be a great chum of his, but was very weak in his Swahili.

Being Friday the Sheheri came up to the mosque and said his afternoon prayers. Another man followed, but his ablutions were very imperfect, and so I expect was his whole service. I sent over to the Sheheri some of our tracts in Arabic characters, but he came across to me afterwards and I read some

Excerpt from the missionary dairy of Anglican colonial Bishop Edward Steere, on his mission to Zanzibar, January 5 1880. Available at archive.org.

The antecedents of ethnography can be found in journals and diary entries produced by explorers of the Empire as they encountered local populations. These personal observations eventually gave way to a more ambitious institutional project. Namely, the systematic categorisation of non-European societies by kinship, religion, physical appearance, and social hierarchy. Ethnographies about "the other" satisfied European curiosity about exotic cultures, supplied material for armchair scholarship, and provided the Empire with intellectual justification for colonisation.

SLIVER OF KERALA HISTORY

20th Century Anthropology

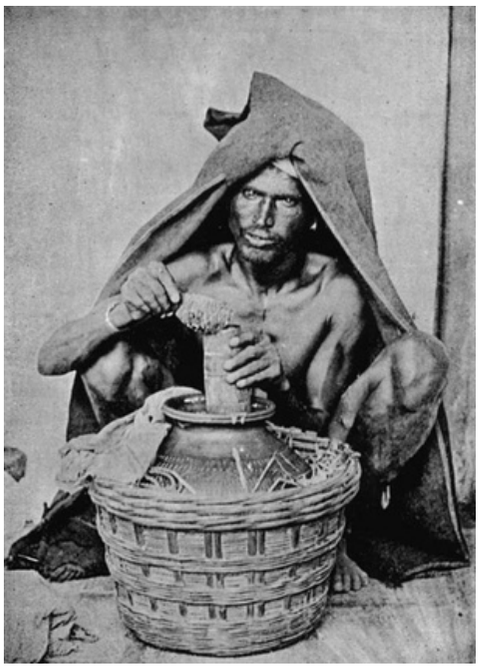
Prominent scholars of 19th and early 20th century India, among them Edgar Thurston and William E. Marshall, drew on now-defunct racist frameworks to produce their ethnographies. These included phrenology, the pseudoscientific reading of facial features and cranial morphology as indicators of intelligence and character; primitivism, which suggested that non-Europeans were biologically, technologically, and intellectually inferior to Western civilisation; and unilineal evolution, which positioned Europeans as the apex of human development and non-Europeans as living remnants of early human evolution.

That these frameworks gained institutional legitimacy reflects how thoroughly scientific inquiry was shaped by political interest; and that of 19th century Europe was to acquire territory, resources, and power on a global scale. In India, the empire's largest colony, ethnographic activity intensified following the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The lethal mass uprising against colonial rule led the empire to realise that controlling a population required understanding it. At once, censuses were established to catalogue and infantilize communities within unscientific categories. By classifying non-Western societies as primitive and incapable of self-governance, colonial scholars reframed oppression as civilisation.

However, the ethnographic landscape changed with the 1901 nationwide census, most notably through the work of Palakkad-born anthropologist L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer, who was responsible for representing the Kingdom of Cochin in Risley's survey. His *Cochin Tribes and Castes* series, alongside brief accounts from Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, detailed the lives of over 50 Malayali communities. Iyer's work was groundbreaking by the standards of his time. Unlike his European contemporaries, he drew on his nativeness to gain insider access to the communities he studied, documenting what mattered to his subjects rather than what the administrative aims of the Crown demanded. His monographs introduced realities of social injustice, caste oppression, and conditions of life under colonial rule, much of which his peers ignored. He rejected the organisation of subjects around hierarchies of savagery, and instead foregrounded the sociocultural precedence of various "primitive" customs, mythologies, and traditions.

Cochin Tribes and Castes argued that Malayali life was rapidly transforming, challenging the findings of leading scholars of scientific racism like Risley who proposed that Indian societies were static and unchanging. Anthropology's task, to Iyer, was to then document this world with honesty before it disappeared.

Photography was still a nascent tool in Indian anthropological practice, yet Iyer produced over a hundred photographs, now held by the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. These images stand in sharp contrast to the work of his contemporaries, whose phrenological approaches produced images of detached, typological specimens. Iyer's photographs were instead largely taken in homes, workplaces, and religious sites, and reflect the intimacy his subjects extended to him through their relaxed poses and unguarded expressions.



[Left] Photograph of a Kannadiyan member taken by Edgar Thurston between 1901 and 1908. The man with a solemn expression is engaged in the unnatural and orchestrated demonstration of an activity, in front of a studio-like setting which reduces daily material culture to props. From The Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol. 3. 1909.

[Right] Photograph of Pulayar women demonstrating crushing methods in front of their residence, taken by Ananthakrishna Iyer between 1901 and 1905. The woman on the left appears to be smiling, or engaged in conversation. *MAA* University of Cambridge P.60769.HUT.

Nonetheless, Iyer was a product of his time. While his photographs offer an unparalleled window into the Kerala of an era he was certain was disappearing, they share with the broader colonial archive a significant omission of data. The jewellery, dress, and objects visible in these images are rarely named or contextualised. Despite Iyer's efforts to subvert the anthropological norms of his time, the material culture in his photos often appears, as it did within colonial ethnography, without the meanings their wearers attached to them.

Yet as these archives become increasingly public, they invite re-examination. For modern anthropologists, they are palimpsests, and incomplete records that can be further written onto with the collaboration of the communities represented in them. A recent online exhibition hosted by Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology Digital Lab does precisely this. In the exhibition, *The Namboothiris and Nairs of 20th Century Kerala*, Iyer's photographs are revisited and enriched by the communities he once photographed, drawing on the recollections of the last generation with first-hand experience of the world his images captured. The following images have been contextualised through a year of fieldwork, consulting with aged Malayalis, generational artisans, and descendants of photographed subjects. The entire collection can be viewed in the online exhibition here. This exhibition, produced by Devaki Vadakepat Menon for the University of Cambridge's MAA Digital Lab, features over 40 photographs and offers a glimpse into the material culture, customs, and ways of life of the Namboothiri and Nair people at the turn of the 20th century.

A costumed Chakkiyar performs with a Nangiyar woman on the cymbal, and a Nambiyar drummer on the mishavu (copper metal drum). The Chakkiyars performed the Koothu for a livelihood. Photograph by L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer. c. 1901-1908. MAA P.58153.ACH2.

SLIVER OF KERALA HISTORY

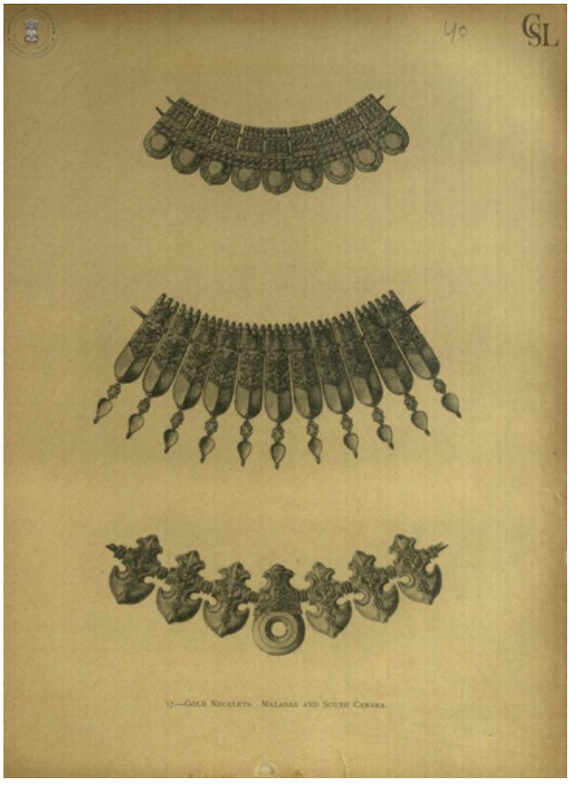
20th Century Anthropology

Originally titled “Chakkiyar Koothu” by Iyer, this photograph appears in Volume II of *Cochin Tribes and Castes* to illustrate Ambalavasi castes, particularly Chakkiyars and Nambiyars. Through photo elicitation, it was identified by the subject’s own descendant, Dr. V. Sreekanth, a professor of physics, as a portrait of the venerated Kutiyattam artist Mani Damodara Chakyar. Damodara Chakyar is photographed by Iyer in Hanuman costume during the Anguliyankam performance (the sixth act of the Sanskrit drama Ascharyachudamani) within the sanctum sanctorum of the Triprayar temple. Photography within temples was an unlikely privilege offered to Iyer, who instrumentalised his identity as a Malayali Brahmin to image restricted locations.

Similarly, this photograph taken inside the Peruvanam Mahadeva Temple of Thrissur illustrates young Namboothiri girls wearing jewellery that is no longer exclusive to Brahmin women. The photograph features the mukkolakkalu necklace, which consists of hollowed gold chambers containing specks of quartz obtained from the idol of the Mukkuthala goddess. Namboothiris believed this apotropaic ornament protected their young women from spiritual ailments, and would replace it with a thali upon marriage to a Namboothiri boy. Below the mukkolakkalu is the kuzhalmothiram, which in its contemporary form is thinner but retains the tubular shape along with the pendant.

Namboothiri girls pose in front of the Peruvanam Mahadeva Temple. Photograph by L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer. c. 1901-1908. MAA P.36570.ACH2

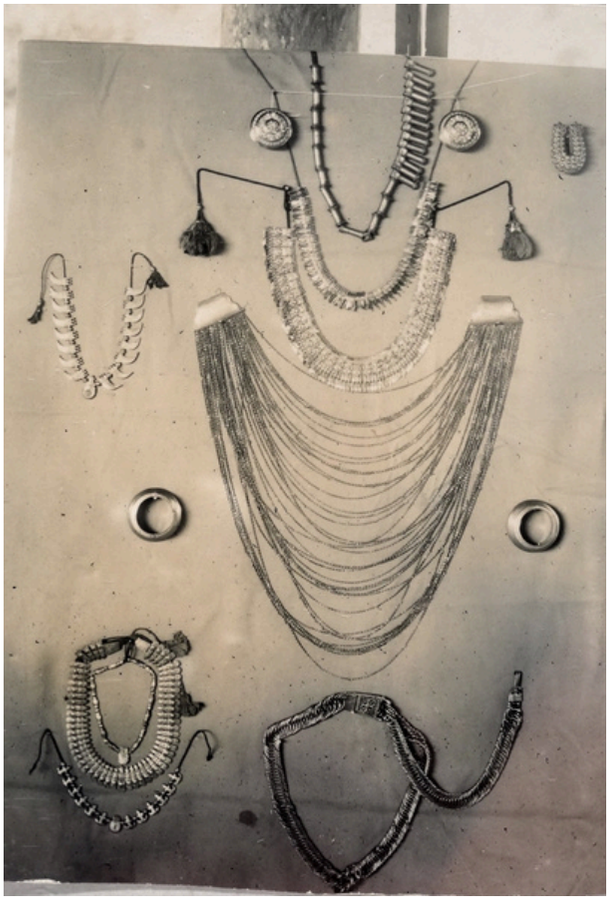
The Chittu earrings, adorned during the Kāthukuttu ceremony, were worn in a ritualistic expansion of the earlobe. Lastly, lying loose across the girls' chests is the kinginimala, composed of gold pellets shaped like anchors and likely pictured in the ethnographic illustration from *The Journal of Indian Art*, Vol. VI (W. Griggs & Sons) from 1896.



“Jewels used mostly by Nair and Tiyar females of Malabar and South Canara” from The Journal of Indian Art, Vol. VI (W. Griggs & Sons). 1896. Available at archive.org

SLIVER OF KERALA HISTORY

20th Century Anthropology



Board of Nair jewellery. Photograph by L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer. c. 1901-1908. MAA P.36615.

Nayar women standing in front of their residence. Photograph by L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer. c. 1901-1908. MAA P.36589.

Iyer uses this image to illustrate Nair jewellery, but did not identify the ornaments. This photograph features the nāgapadam, an ornament designed to resemble the hood of a snake and worn as an ode to the Nairs' alleged Nāga origins, and practice of serpent worship. The kasumala also makes an appearance. Consisting of numerous gold coins with religious motifs (often depicting the goddess Lakshmi), this ornament was popular among married Nair and Namboothiri women and worn as a symbol of affluence after marriage.

The women in this photograph also adorn a choker-like addigai (also known as pathakam). Many Nairs wore this article as an homage to their royal ancestry, referencing the addigai's popularity within ancient Kerala's ruling class.

Other ornaments that Iyer photographed but did not identify include (from top to bottom) mukkollakallu, thoda earrings, mukkuthi nose ornament (top right), thalikootam, poothali, manimala, pulinakkam mala (left), nagapadam (bottom left), kuzhalmothiram, kingini mala, arapattam waist belt (bottom centre). "Boards" pinned with ornaments made frequent appearances in colonial ethnographies.

PROFILE OF THE WRITER

Devaki Vadakepat Menon is a PhD student in Anthropology at the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on heritage preservation, traditional knowledge, and the sustainability of cultural practices in rural Kerala. Besides, she is also a part of INKochi Magazine.

TEXTILE Fabric ART

My journey as a textile artist began not in a studio, but in the quiet corners of my home, surrounded by fabrics, threads, and the comforting rhythm of handmade objects. Growing up in West Bengal, textiles represented more than materials; they reflected memory, identity, and emotion. The tactile connection to cloth captivated me from an early age.

Maitri Chakraborty

Experts from the online discussion engaged with Maitri Chakraborty, a fabric artist, in conversation led by Varghese Thomas, the editor and publisher of INKochi.

Nature has profoundly influenced my life, inspiring me to recreate my thoughts with a fresh perspective. Fabric serves as my canvas for expressing that vision. I explore motifs like birds, nests, fragmented homes, and natural textures. My love for foliage and animals consistently informs my designs.

Materials play a crucial role in my work. I find beauty in recycled textiles, fabric scraps, natural fibre, and layered surfaces. Techniques such as hand embroidery, appliqué, quilting, eco-printing, and mixed-media, especially "fibre sculpture", allow me to build depth and dimension.

I enjoy combining traditional hand processes with experimental textures. These choices create tactile richness and emotional weight, inviting viewers to not just see, but almost feel the work.

My creative process typically begins with close observation of objects, studying each detail, sketching, imagining, selecting the right medium, and then creating.

Travel and personal experiences inspire my projects. The landscapes of rural Bengal, the atmosphere of villages, birds, flowers, and the simplicity of daily life all influence my artistic expression.

For me, colour is profoundly tied to emotion. Earthy browns and muted greys evoke memories and a sense of time, shaping viewers' perceptions and emotions. I never choose colours randomly; they are deeply connected to the narratives of my work. In my bird series, soft natural palettes, like earthy tones of brown, ivory, and ash black, symbolise hope amid uncertainty.

The "Chirping" bird series is one of my most meaningful projects, created entirely from recycled textile waste. It taught me how to create collage art without purchasing new materials. I transformed discarded fabrics into meaningful artworks, revealing their essence as memory, texture, and possibility.

This series holds deep emotional significance for me. It reflects our gradual loss of the sound of birds chirping in our lives. Our mornings, now filled with harsh vehicle horns and bustling streets, leave us restless and disconnected. Through my artworks, I seek that lost peace, the tranquil weather, soft morning light, and gentle sounds of birds singing. I envision beautiful mornings where birds chirp freely, building their nests and living simply with nature.

TEXTILE Fabric ART

TEXTILE Fabric ART

My bird series goes beyond a portrayal of birds; it resonates with a sense of longing for silence, nature, and balance. It reminds us of the harmony we once shared with our world and expresses hope for reconnection through art. The act of stitching carries generational memory, echoing traditional Kantha practices of Bengal. While my visual language is contemporary, it remains rooted in inherited craft, bridging past and present.

TEXTILE *Fabric* ART

One of my biggest challenges has been proving myself, not just to others, but also to the circumstances around me. From the beginning, the path has not been easy. Preparing for college demanded patience, discipline, and determination. I encountered moments of uncertainty that could have undermined my momentum, but I never allowed self-doubt to creep in. I have always believed in my vision, understanding that perseverance is as vital as talent.

Technology has also influenced my practice. Digital tools assist in planning layouts and experimenting with compositions, but I consciously balance them with hand processes. I embrace technology for efficiency, while ensuring it does not overshadow the soul of handmade work.

To emerging textile artists, I would advise: honour your roots, but embrace experimentation. Develop technical skills while nurturing your narrative. Allow time to shape your identity.

Collaboration has enriched my journey, especially through working with local artisans and participating in workshops. These exchanges have taught me humility and expanded my creative vocabulary.

Sustainable art practice is not just a choice for me; it is a responsibility. As a textile artist, my work is closely tied to environmental impact. The textile industry generates enormous waste, making it vital for artists and designers to respond consciously. If my work inspires even a small shift in how people value materials or reconsider waste, then sustainability transcends method; it becomes a profound influence.

TEXTILE *Fabric* ART

Maitri Chakraborty is a textile artist and designer based in Kolkata. Her work is centred around material exploration, sustainability, and storytelling through fabric. She holds both a BFA and an MFA from the Government College of Art and Craft in Kolkata.

As a textile designer, Maitri experiments with natural dyes, nature prints, felt processes, eco-prints, surface design, texture, and material innovation. She has participated in various exhibitions, including the Textile Art Exhibition in Kolkata, organised by the Academy of Fine Arts. Her goal is to create visual narratives that reconnect viewers with nature, memory, and the silent stories embedded in textiles.

INTRODUCING

Dr. Arya Gopi

Dr. Arya Gopi is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of English at The Zamorin's Guruvayurappan College, University of Calicut, Kerala, where she has been serving since August 2010. She is a bilingual poet, translator, and academic working in English and Malayalam.

Her published books include Malayalam poetry collections Malakha Matsyam (2003), Jeevante Vakkukal (DC Books, 2006), Avasanathe Manushyan (Green Books, 2014), Pakalanival (DC Books, 2016), Uriyadum Kalathe Pennungal (DC Books, 2021), and Kannadiyile Daivam (DC Books, 2024). Her English poetry collections are Sob of Strings (2011; revised edition 2016) and One Hundred Lines of Discords (Write Left and Centre, 2023). Her academic and critical publications include Ochezhuthu (Perakka Books, 2020) and Readings on Kerala (Calicut University Press, 2022), a prescribed BA English textbook.

She has received more than fifty national and international literary awards, including the Kerala State Sahitya Akademi Kanakasree Award (2016), Vyloppily Award (2014), Vayalar Ramavarma Poetry Prize (2016), International ONV Foundation Yuva Award (2016), ONV Cultural Academy National Yuva Prathiba Award (2016), Kerala State Youth Welfare Board Swami Vivekananda Yuva Prathibha Award (2016), Kerala State Youth Commission Youth Icon Award (2016), Thonnakkal Asan National Cultural Institute (under Government Ministry) Young Writer Award (2021), Kakkad Award for Poetry (2004), London Sree Narayana Guru Mission Award for Poetry (2005), and the K.P. Kayalad Award for Poetry (2026).

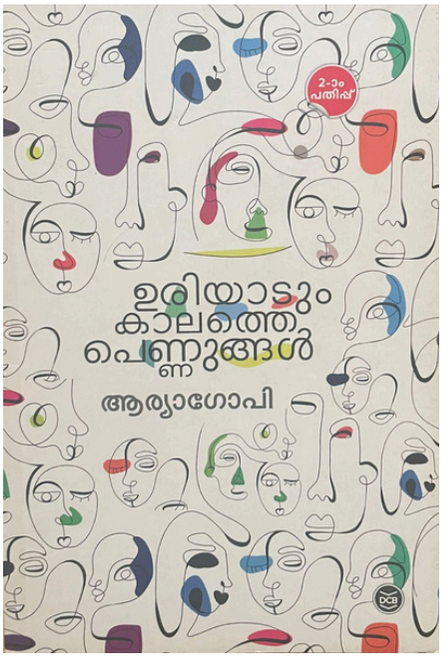
Her poems and essays have appeared in journals such as Indian Literature, World Literature Today, Muse India, Teesta Review, Modern Literature International Journal, The Usawa Literary Review, Guftugu Magazine, eShe Magazine, Kavishala Magazine, Samyukta Poetry, and Malayalam Literary Survey. Her work has also appeared in anthologies, including Scent of Rain: Remembering Jayanta Mahapatra (Red River Publication, 2024). Her writings have been translated into French, German, Hindi, Kannada, Bengali, and English.

She has represented Malayalam literature at the Sahitya Akademi International Festival of Letters in Imphal (2019), Shimla (2022), and New Delhi (2024). She was invited by the UNESCO City of Literature, Vilnius, Lithuania, to present Kozhikode's literary culture to young audiences. In 2023, she was shortlisted for the Slam-O-Vision competition at the Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature. In 2025, she was a Resident Fellow of the Poetic Frequencies Residency at Karlsruhe, Heidelberg University and Heidelberg UNESCO Creative Cities, Germany. She is a recipient of the Sharjah International Book Festival Translation Grant.

Dr. Arya Gopi holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Calicut (2018). Her doctoral dissertation is titled "The Other India: A Socio-literary Analysis of the Select Works of Mark Tully." She completed her MA in English Language and Literature in 2009 (First Rank) and her BA in English in 2007 (Third Rank). She qualified the UGC-JRF-NET in December 2008 and completed a UGC Minor Research Project (2011–2013) titled "Drugs, Crimes and Bolaño: The End of Boom Movement or Origin of Visceral Realism."

Her research articles have been published in UGC-CARE listed and peer-reviewed journals on topics including contemporary literature, political reportage, visceral realism, posthumanism, ecological criticism, women's writing, Dalit narratives, and media studies. She has presented papers at national and international academic conferences.

She serves as an Executive Committee Member of the Malayalam Mission under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of Kerala, and works as a judge and evaluator for literary and cultural bodies including the Kerala State Sahitya Akademi, Kerala School Kalotsavam, and the Kerala State Youth Festival. She is also a mentor for the Back to School Project of the Kudumbashree Mission, Government of Kerala.



Her academic and creative interests include contemporary Indian and Malayalam literature, translation studies, women's writing, postcolonial studies, cultural theory, posthumanism, ecological criticism, and experimental literary forms.

INTRODUCING

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The Idea of Ice

The South knew no ice—
only rivers rehearsing green, palms pressing sunlight into themselves,
a heat that clung to skin, to bone, to thought,
that whispered, “you are not ready.”

Ice—I read of it, inhaled it, drank it from pages, from screens,
a cathedral of impossible glass, a queen exhaling silver into air I could never touch,
a language of hush, a dialect of crystal
that children believed in, as if breath itself could turn solid.

Now Titlis speaks.
Snow folds the sky into itself, each flake a syllable
piercing memory, a sentence I almost remember but cannot,
a code that gnaws at the mind,
insisting I learn something I cannot yet name.

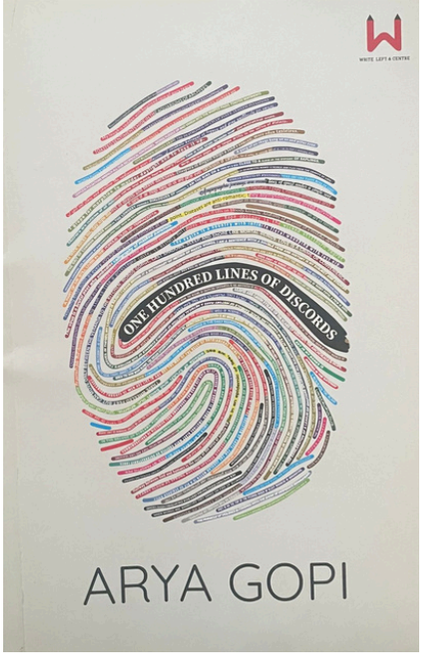
I am not the child.
The child echoes in me—tremulous, anxious, reaching for astonishment,
a bird flung into impossibilities,
across Himalayas that rise like sermons in white,
infinities of cold scraping thought raw.

Ice is no weather.
It is thought made solid,
dream distilled to stone water,
a mind emptied, sharpened,
longing refracted into prism,
folded between palm and peak,
between heat and impossible white,
between what I was and what I almost became.

Kerala carries no frost.
Yet within me, it waits—alive, precise, mythic,
a fascination that will not melt,
that gnaws, whispers, pulses,
in the tremor between snowflake and breath,
in the silence that remembers itself,
in the frost that says:
you will learn my language,
you will speak it,
you will astonish yourself again.

POEM BY:

DR. ARYA GOPI



The River Within: A Journey of Giving and Longing

Story By Zera Elizabeth

When morning breaks, she transforms into a river, flowing gracefully through forests and fields, weaving her way through villages and cities. In her journey, she rushes, collides, and bends unexpectedly, never confined to a single rhythm. Around her, familiar voices create a gentle ripple, yet none can truly reach the depths of her being. Words may skim over her surface, but they often miss the intricate layers that lie beneath.

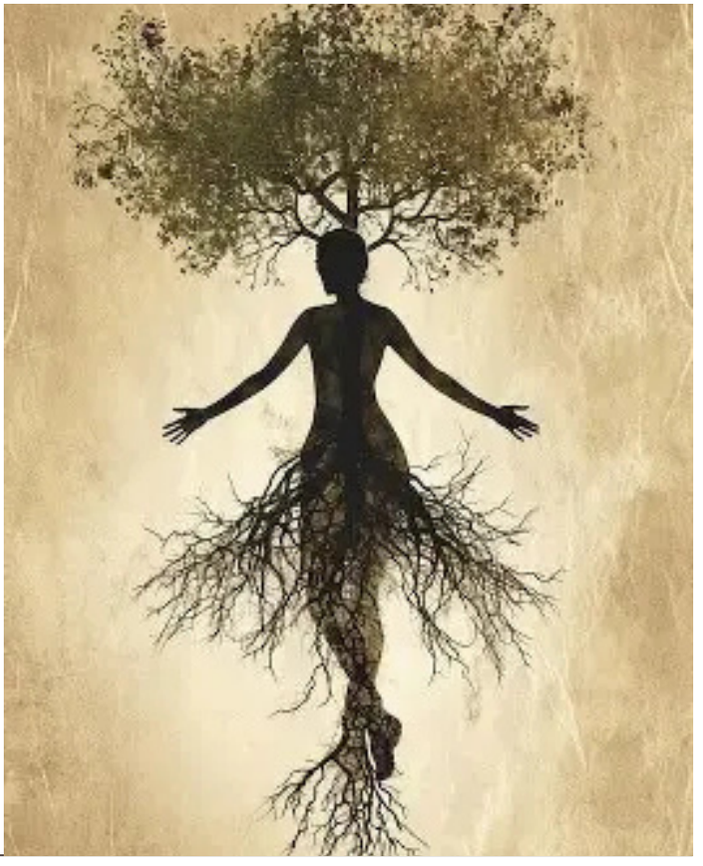
To those who observe from a distance, she may seem like an island—distant and unreachable, set apart from the world. Yet, within her lies a profound loneliness, a feeling so deep that it often feels buried beyond reach. She has patiently sealed this emptiness beneath layers of earth, and in time, she has raised a towering tree above it. In its generous shade, weary souls gather, finding a temporary respite from their thirst for connection. From its bending branches, she lovingly offers fruit into waiting hands, deriving joy from nourishing those around her. However, there are seasons when she stands like a withered tree—leaves fallen, bark dry, feeling helpless in her stillness. Beneath the surface, her roots reach out desperately, searching for a solitary drop of water, yearning toward a hidden spring.

the tender climate of a compassionate heart—a presence that ventures inward, unafraid of the dark, travelling through the hidden corridors of her being until her thirst transforms into a beautiful bloom.

She does not yearn for the vastness of an ocean. Her wish is simple: just enough water to moisten her roots. Perhaps within that single, luminous drop—an act of understanding that shines brightly—she will uncover the long-sought shoreline toward which her quiet current has been flowing since the very first stir of thirst.

When I use the word “she,” I’m not speaking of just one person; I’m representing a collective spirit. “She” embodies all the countless hearts that flow like rivers at dawn and the many souls that stand like trees at dusk, offering gentle shade and support to those in need.

“She” is not merely an individual; she signifies a beautiful tapestry woven from diverse experiences, held together by a shared heartbeat of empathy and compassion. >>>



The River Within: A Journey of Giving and Longing

Anyone who resonates with this idea is part of that “she.” This includes those who may seem strong and composed on the surface, while their inner selves crave nourishment and understanding. It includes those who extend solace to others, all the while longing for someone to extend that same comfort in return.

Maybe you have been that river, flowing with grace. Perhaps you have stood as that tree, providing shelter for others while secretly yearning for the rain. So when I write “she,” it could be you, someone you cherish, or an experience far too vast to be fully captured in words. “She” represents anyone who has mastered the art of illuminating the lives of others while grappling with their own shadows.

---Zera Elizabeth

The solitude of a single cup of coffee

The solitude of a single cup of coffee
sets the mind adrift
along deserted shores
Thoughts, like sea-breezes,
arrive and recede -
and in every brushing wave
the salt of your words lingers

In the fading warmth of the brew
your breath lies hidden;
memories settle upon the surface
like a fine, restless dust
As I take a quiet sip
and lift my gaze,
beyond a window veiled in mist
the sun withdraws -
as it did on the day you left,
sinking into an indifferent red

The bitterness of coffee
mirrors the taste of your absence
With the cooling cup
I remain seated,
amid thoughts that burn and sear -
remembering you once more
only in the fragile hope
of learning how to forget.

---Zera Elizabeth

Zera Elizabeth is based in the UK. She is a poet and writer who explores the unseen dimensions of human experience. Her work examines themes of vulnerability, healing, and the enduring strength that emerges from self-discovery. Zera loves travelling, reading widely, and is deeply drawn to music, especially melodies from the 90s.

elementa 2.0

a photo journey
by nalini tyabji

SUNETRA LAHIRI'S 'ELEMENTAL 2.0': WHERE TEXTILES REMEMBER, IMAGINE, AND BREATHE

TEXTILE ARTIST SUNETRA LAHIRI TRANSFORMS MEMORY INTO MATERIAL IN HER EVOCATIVE TWO-DAY SOLO EXHIBITION ELEMENTAL 2.0, RECENTLY ON VIEW AT THE KOLKATA CENTRE FOR CREATIVITY. THOUGH BRIEF IN DURATION, THE EXHIBITION LEAVES A LASTING IMPRINT—ONE STITCHED WITH NOSTALGIA, FANTASY, AND QUIET JOY.

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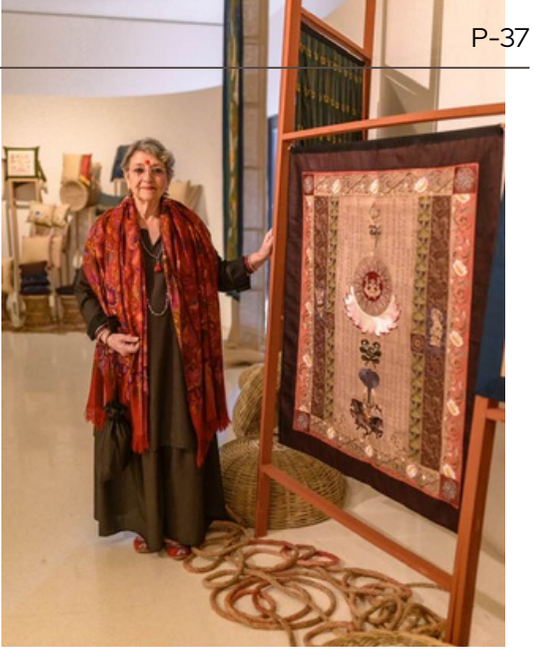


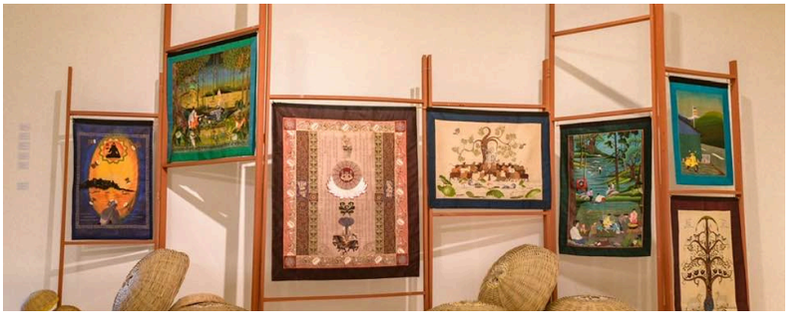
elementa 2.0

elementa 2.0

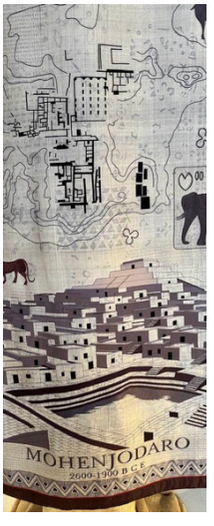
a photo journey

IN ELEMENTAL 2.0, SUNETRA LAHIRI DOESN'T MERELY EXHIBIT TEXTILES—SHE WEAVES MEMORY, CRAFTSMANSHIP, AND QUIET OPTIMISM INTO A LIVING, BREATHING NARRATIVE. THE RESULT IS AN EXHIBITION THAT FEELS INTIMATE YET EXPANSIVE, ROOTED IN TRADITION YET RESONANT WITH CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE.

PHOTO CREDIT: NALINI TYABJI



NALINI TYABJI (LEFT) ALONG WITH THE ARTIST SUNETRA LAHIRI



CURATED BY KOUNTEYA SINHA WITH ART DIRECTION BY OIENDRILA RAY KAPUR, ELEMENTAL 2.0 IS CONCEIVED AS A MULTI-SENSORY JOURNEY—AN IMMERSIVE WORLD OF EMBROIDERED COLLECTIBLES THAT BLUR THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN CRAFT, ART, AND STORYTELLING.

Welcome to Kochi

Photographer and visual artist Hariharan. S writes about how he decided to use the materiality of the photographic prints in his installation **'Welcome to Kochi'** to convey the deeper reality of tidal flooding in Kochi, rather than just documenting the tragedy's remnants.

Welcome to Kochi

The Physicality of Art: Exploring Materiality and Impact.

It was in early February, 2025, that I got a call from artist Radha Gomaty requesting me to join a group of artists, photographers and performers in a project, the priority of which was to address the tidal flooding prevalent in the islets, rivers and lagoons near Kochi and Paravur and its effect on the people living there and interpret it through my artistic practice and medium.

The project was being organised by EQUINOCT, an organisation of scientists dedicated to collecting data about tidal flooding and researching ways to help people survive its effects, and she was to be the curator of the exhibition.
I immediately asked her the reason for including me in her list, as all the other artists in it were living in places that were experiencing the effects of the flooding in varying degrees, whereas I was, for the past quarter of a century, living in a landlocked Palakkad.

She cited that as the reason and told me that she wanted to include the 'outsider' view too in the project, which she believed I could perfectly deliver. The element of Pathos & Grief, which she perceived in my work as a vital element in my earlier series of work, tilted the scales much in my favour as it resonated with one of the principal concepts of KaBhumM!!! - Azhal / Grief.

I wasn't an 'outsider' entirely, though, as I had lived in Kochi and its suburbs for more than two decades from 1970 to 1991 during my formative years. But the sea and the flooding associated with it and its associated bodies of water were alien to me, as I was living in Ambalamedu, an eastern suburb of Kochi, which was indeed a bit away from the sea.

An experience I had while working in a small railway station in Tamil Nadu during my stint with the Railways too surfaced in my mind and memory while I was walking through the affected coastal villages and islets in Kochi, during my field visits to the affected places.

The year was 1992, and I was working as a Railway Booking Clerk in the wayside station of Sendurai, 100 kms away from Tiruchirapalli. The monsoon was extraordinarily heavy that year, and there was a stretch of three days and nights when a cyclonic storm that crossed the coast battered us continuously. It was around 9:30 am, and the Rameswaram - Chennai passenger was due to pull into the station in 20 minutes. A slow rumble could be heard from afar, and soon it changed to a roar. Singaravel, the son of the tea stall owner opposite the station, rushed in screaming and yelled at us to climb atop the station building as the villagers had broken the bund of the huge Eri (water tank) and the released waters were sweeping their way towards the station.

The handful of passengers were directed to go up the elevated platform, cross the tracks and run for their lives across the fields that stretched endlessly there. The Station Master cut the incoming distant signal to red so that the train would be stopped a bit away and shouted at me to join him. We climbed a ladder on the side of the station building just in time. The roar of the wave sweeping in was deafening, and it brought tons of dirt and slush, which it meticulously deposited inside the station and our quarters. All the signal connections were cut.

The train was halted about a km away from the station.

It took about 7 to 8 hours for us to be able to come down, and we had to wade through about knee-deep slush. The quarters were unfit for living due to the dirt and slush the waters had brought in. An engine had been brought from Tiruchirapalli, and the train was reversed for a kilometre and stationed there till the washed-away tracks and the station control panel with its short-circuited system could be repaired.

Two coaches were detached and kept in the loop line, and it was in these coaches we stayed for about a week till our living quarters were made habitable again.

The mayhem that those swirling waters created in our lives for about a week, even while being unbearable at that time, is nothing compared to the daily and enduring trouble that the tides give to the people of these sunny-day flooded lands in Kochi.

Soon after I joined the project, I had decided that the one thing I certainly wouldn't be doing was to take the portraits of the affected people and hang them as beautifully framed "art" works in a gallery for people to look at them and admire my picture-taking skill and lavish praise upon it.

Early inventors and practitioners of photography, like Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot, revelled in the alchemy of image making, experimenting with the effects of various materials on the development process.

It was during a field visit to Edakochi, a place severely affected by the flooding of 2024 and 2025, that I got to see the destruction that unreceding and stagnant lagoon water with its potent and dissolved salt had unleashed upon the soil of the land, the structures of the homes in which people still "lived" and most visibly on their belongings. These everyday objects, so familiar to us, had become so corroded, and their very appearance seemed to have undergone a transformation that they now looked like ghostly remnants of what they once looked like. This decay... this corrosion of the land and the belongings of the people who lived upon it and their utter helplessness was what struck me immediately, and I wondered if I could use my medium of expression in a way that conveyed this human condition to the viewer. It was then that I decided that I would be creating a photographic installation, and the transforming materiality of the prints and the other materials used could be used to convey the destruction of the land due to the slow and silent corrosion.

Let me continue from the installation I conceived, executed and exhibited in KaBhumM!!! deliberately titled "Welcome to Kochi" on the lines of tourist brochures exhorting innocent tourists to visit the supposedly beautiful spots of a city.

The structure and premise of the installations are based on the sluice gate, which is often the first sight we behold when we approach the mainland through lagoons and canals, a remnant of our futile attempt to resist the tidal flooding slowly submerging Kochi. Edakochi 'boasted' of many such antiquated sluice gates.

While we tout Kochi as an idyllic place to visit in tourist brochures, the reality of Kochi is that it is silently crumbling, eaten by the salt of the trapped waters of now increasingly frequent, long-standing tidal flooding caused by lopsided urban planning & triggered further now with the grim reality of climate change-induced sea rise, a fact that we conveniently overlook.

For a whole section of the populace, slowly being transformed into refugees, what remains are footprints left behind on the salt & soil residue and the broken, abandoned structures that once were their homes. Existence for them is now, a slice of life bottled up in a pickle jar of brine.

Salt, at times as a destroyer and in its diverse manifestations also as a nurturer, plays a central role in my installation. A great inspiration was the role that salt as an omnipotent character playing a part in totally transforming the relationship between the protagonist and his daughter in Shakespeare's epic play King Lear.

Crumpled, drenched, folded, or torn: photographs, when physically manipulated, can become the raw material for three-dimensional works of art, a potential effectively explored by many contemporary artists. Contemporary photographic practices of many noteworthy visual artists are replete with the concept of materiality of the photograph. Such processes continue the photographic experiments of early 20th century artists, such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, to expand the possibilities of photography beyond the limits of documentation and to convey a deeper reality.

The photographic images, rolled up inside the glass pickle jars placed upon the platform fabricated on the frame of the sluice gate and immersed halfway in salt water, illustrate the slow destruction of the land and the homes it holds through the snail-like pace at which the salt water breaks down the imagery fixed upon them. This fading process was documented daily through visual image-making processes, and a week later, a collage print of this transformation was also incorporated into the artwork by displaying it on the backdrop.

Amazingly, a comparison of the daily destruction of the pigments and dyes of the main photographic print displayed inside the glass pickle jars, half-filled with seawater, made an interesting read. At the end of the week, the sediments of the pigments in the ink used to print the images, seem to have reacted with the sea water in which it is immersed and given it a bloody hue.

One is reminded of a scorcher of a remark by MP Paul, literary critic of yesteryears, about Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's masterpiece "Baalyakaalasakhi"... that it is a page torn off from life itself with the blood still oozing from the edges...

The base of the rusty iron structure, filled with clay collected from the shores of an island slowly being lost to the tidal surge, is home to eight mangrove stalks, which I hoped would sprout into life within the four weeks that this exhibition was hosted.

A particular memory, etched in my heart and mind, is that of a group of men, women and children from Valanthakkad, an islet which regularly faces the ire of the flooding waters, visiting the exhibition and speaking at length with us artists about how they perceived our works, which were based on their travails and predicament.

One is also reminded daily of the harsh reality that "to create is too difficult and slow, but to destroy is so easy and fast".
The concepts of creation, preservation and destruction, which are basic tenets in nature and are interpreted in all their myriad manifestations through art, are incorporated in my installation.

Apart from the installation, I had exhibited two big posters which carried a photograph each of a dilapidated house totally surrounded by the tidal waters creeping in.

A lone inhabitant was still living there as he had no other place to go and was abjectly wondering all the while whether what remains of his home could withstand the monsoon that was on then.

An inscription - a stanza from T.S.Eliot's poem 'The Hollow Men' - was included in the posters. Written a hundred years ago, in the tragic aftermath of the First World War, these lines chillingly remind us of the dystopian slowness of great tragedies.

"This is the way the world ends...
Not with a bang but with a whimper."

The seven months of interacting with a diverse group of people, which included artists, sculptors, photographers, film makers, caricaturists, cartoonists, writers, scientists, researchers, field workers and the affected populace, was in fact a wonderful process of unlearning and re-learning a lot about nature, the people's travails and the varied artistic practices of fellow participants.

The exhibition, which ran for around a month at the Kerala Museum in Edappalli, was a well-attended one with eminent artists like Mallika Sarabhai and Sudhir Patwardhan visiting us and interacting with the artists.

Within a few months after the exhibition concluded, a moment of high elation was experienced when the State Government issued an official notification early this year that destruction to life, livelihood, property and basic amenities by flooding by waters crossing the high tide line would be termed "coastal high tide flooding" / "sea incursion" and would be declared as a 'special disaster' and those affected by it would be eligible for compensation and benefits. It was immensely gratifying to have played a minuscule part in spreading enlightenment about a silent and tragic happening along the banks of our islets and to be a part of the great effort being put in by selfless organisations like the Community Resource Centre and Equinoct.

Many national and international artists graced the exhibition with their presence. Visiting artists featured with Hariharan in these photographs taken with the installation as backdrop include Sudhir Patwardhan, Mallika Sarabhai, Vivek Vilasini, Abhimanue Govindan, Boney K. R, Damian Christinger, Murali Cheeroth and Elodie Pong.

Welcome to Kochi

Radha Gomaty, curator of the exhibition 'KaBhumM' explains the reason for including Hariharan (a comparative 'outsider') in her list of participant artists.
****

Flouting my own selection criteria for listing artists for KaBhumM!!! That initially focused on those living in Kochi or in the ecosystem of sea-salt-wetlands- estuaries, even if not in Kochi, without any need for additional deliberation, I decided to invite artist Hariharan S, native of inland Palakkad and not even remotely raised near any sea or estuary in the KaBhumM!!! Project for the gritty unflinching sensitivity with which he has in his creative work presented Body as a minefield, riddled not with noisy explosions but with implosions that are all the more devastating with their silence.

It takes a different range of hearing to listen to the Implosions of Grief.

In the field visits that EQUINOCT facilitated after our vibrant 3-day immersive workshop with our excellent knowledge resources, one of the many images that marked us all deeply was that of a tall sluice corroded with rust made ludicrously as it was with Iron...
Imagine! Iron!... To resist the surge of the saline waters of the tides into river mouths and estuaries! "An Irony indeed!" I caught myself thinking as Hariharan detailed his plans over the phone.

There is a certain rigour of step in the way Hariharan, self-trained as a photographer, observes, chooses, zooms in and then puts across his 'take'. He carefully picks out details that "tell" with a photographer's eye and then amplifies and elaborates upon the metaphor they offer up to reading with a kind of controlled poetic precision.

A representative Red Carpet 'welcomes' viewers who have just entered the gallery having walked through a water installation of a facsimile of a house affected by tidal flooding experiencing what's now an integral part of daily routine of all those who live in houses afflicted by unnatural levels of tidal flooding-having to balance on concrete blocks to not get their feet wet from porch to gate and a lot of times even inside the house too to get from one room to the next..

The title card, stained with mud, reads WELCOME TO KOCHI where the Red-Carpet ends...

A tall structure requires visitors to crane their necks up a bit. Welded from rusted iron, its appearance, it derives from the visual of the sluice but is also designed to be a two-level shelf, with both levels filled with salt-caked dark alluvial mud collected from the affected sites.

The plight of being inundated with long term regularity by salt water... the sense of being cut off... isolated... subject to the slow burn of saline corrosion whose result is devastated sanitation & electrical systems, infected feet, the death of fruit-bearing trees, plants and kitchen gardens, the slow collapse of dwellings and all dreams of life within them leaving behind the suppressed storms of anxiety and anger... The cold, heavy weight of depression is all metaphorised by the heavy glass jars placed in 3 rows of 4 jars each, one behind another, that traditionally were used to pickle various produce in brine.

Only here, what's pickled inside these jars of brine on the shelf at eye level are not sliced mangoes or gooseberries or cucumbers but a copy each to a jar, of the photograph of a single house already collapsed in parts, the lone resident of which had spent some time with Hariharan sharing the precarity, the hopelessness and utter loneliness of his no-exit situation.

In fact, the huge vertical crack printed on the backdrop of the sluice-inspired iron structure is the blown-up photograph of a real crack, a huge vertical one down the wall of the house. The result was unexpected.

The photos began to respond to their placement in brine with an unpredictable dynamic poetry all their own that stunned the artist as much as it did the rest of us.

Their dramatic shifts of colour, patterns of fading and bleeding out that ended in an uncannily flesh-coloured fluidity inside the jars that gradually assumed the greyness of dying, were documented every single day and then added to the display from which it had emerged with a quiet voice all its own...

Each time the photos were changed, new patterns emerged, but all to the same end, disintegration of detail into the opaque pink sameness of flesh that death then rapidly took over with its grey sombreness.

While this drama plays out in the upper shelf, in the shelf below mangrove saplings, the original inhabitants of the oscillating estuarine ecosystem continued their lives without mishap in the salty estuarine mud...

On their way out Hariharan ensured that the visitors are confronted once more with two more stark black & white photographs of the house devastated by tidal flooding, this time with TS Eliot's grim lines that serves as a searing takeaway that assails our ignorance/ indifference to the plight of our fellow beings and our refusal to admit to our complicity in the tragedy that engulfs our Commons:

"This is the way the world ends... Not with a bang but a whimper" ...

[from 'Hollow Men', 1925]

Curator Radha Gomaty is with one of the two posters created by him that were part of the exhibition.

Red Signal

It is because i'm restrained often
that this place stays safe from
certain accidents

If not, I/ Sea
will have hammered my way
right into this insane city's centre.

I'd have barged into their houses
flooding the insides with my salt water
Unable even to take a shit, these fellas
would've run clutching their throats
in search of a breather.

A good soaking with my salty water
... and I'd have rotted away
their uber-luxury interiors
Or
I'd punch holes in the walls of dams
And let loose
a torrent sweeping up
all the forests,
all the mountains...all
the forest's rivers
The animals must
overrun the cities... Then where
will all these festivities go? Where
will all these intoxicants dance? Who
will sing here?

The Thrones of Power,
the Legislative Houses will all
be shattered...Then who
will remain thriving here, swilling
drinks and stuffing
their faces? I'd like to see that.

There is a limit to how much
one can bear...All fences
need pulling down...
Right in the middle of the lives
of this fella...that fella...the other fella
I shall stand
burning a Red Signal
Burning I shall stand...
-Red Signal.

Poem written by Sudhamsu (writer and artist) after seeing Hariharan's installation 'Welcome to Kochi'. This was translated from Malayalam by Radha Gomaty.

Sudhamsu peering out from behind the installation.

Prof. Manoj Vyloor's note on my installation, 'Welcome to Kochi'.

At the entrance of KaBhumM, the evocative exhibition curated by Radha Gomaty, visitors are immediately confronted by a visceral and deeply conceptual work by the well-known photographer and visual artist Hariharan S. Operating at the intersection of performance, installation, and environmental commentary, Hariharan's monumental piece commands attention, not just for its physical scale, but for its searing conceptual depth.

Towering at nine feet, the centrepiece takes the form of a dysfunctional tide gate, forged from high-gauge metal, which is an imposing and inert industrial relic, permanently stuck open. It is a haunting metaphor, a gateway that can no longer protect, a failed barrier between the land and the unrelenting sea.

Perched precariously on the ledge of this structure are numerous glass jars, each containing a black-and-white photograph, elegantly melancholic images of real coastal homes near Kochi, documented by the artist himself, each a quiet testimony to the lived trauma of tidal flooding. These photographs, half-submerged in varying concentrations of collected saline water from affected coastal regions, are slowly disintegrating, their ink bleeding away as the days pass.

Here, the installation becomes a living, self-destructive laboratory, which then is a temporal performance where destruction is both process and message. As the images fade into obscurity, the water they sit in gains unexpected hues, often darkening into a sinister, blood-tinged murk. This unnerving transformation is no accident. It is an aesthetic articulation of environmental toxicity, a subtle yet chilling reminder of how the ecological collapse is not only corroding our surroundings but also erasing our histories, memories, and homes.

Beneath the installation, Hariharan plants a quiet but resolute counterpoint: saplings from a mangrove forest, carefully placed around the base of the structure. These young shoots, tender yet tenacious, point toward regeneration. In their presence lies a thesis, a proposition for resistance, a natural antidote to the menace of coastal erosion and salination. The artist makes a strong, non-negotiable claim: only the dense, living network of mangrove forests can safeguard these vulnerable ecosystems, restore biodiversity, and reestablish a threatened ecological equilibrium.

Welcome to Kochi

Suspended above the installation is a menacing metal hook, dangling from a heavy chain, a symbol Hariharan refers to as akin to Democles' dagger. Its implicit threat looms large, suggesting the ever-present possibility of annihilation should we continue to ignore the ecological alarms that surround us. The work's slow decay and potential renewal coalesce into a multi-sensory, metaphor-rich narrative that is as intellectually rigorous as it is emotionally charged.

Had the mangrove saplings been allowed to mature, their breathing roots unfurling beneath the rusted tide gate over the course of the exhibition, the piece would have reached an even more profound symbolic crescendo. Yet even in its current state, Hariharan's installation stands as one of the most powerful and multidimensional works in KaBhumM. It reaffirms his place as one of the most compelling experimental voices in contemporary Indian art as a thinker, a seeker, and a provocateur who dares to merge aesthetics with urgent ecological critique.

---**Prof. Manoj Vyloor**

I should also be extending my heartfelt thanks to the curator of the exhibition Ms.Radha Gomaty, my fellow artists and scientists who participated in the exhibition, the main functionaries and volunteers of Equinoct and the Kerala Museum, Edappalli, Mr. Dhaneesh and Mr. Azad of Edakochi who took me to the inundated places there and Mr. Subin of Kadavanthara who fabricated the structure of the installation exactly as I had conceived it and the multitude of viewers who turned up to view the exhibition and took time off to interact with us.

A special mention ought to be made of the resilience of the people of the islets, who, in the midst of their misery and hardship, were kind enough to take us around those shores and talk to us.

---**Hariharan S**

Hariharan.S is an Indian visual artist who started out as a painter and later switched to photography. Moving away from his early documentary (nature and social) style, his recent work is more conceptual and concerned with the materiality of the medium and its relation to the subject or content he tries to interact with. His social and environmental concerns are integral to his practice and work. His work has been published in many national and international art journals and exhibited in museums and galleries internationally. His series of work 'Barbecue Republic - a Requiem for Flesh' won him a Kerala Lalithakala Akademi grant in 2021 and has been brought out as a book. He's also been twice awarded by the 'Black and White Universe' of London for his excellence in Monochrome photography. He lives in Palakkad.

The Mysteries of the Female Body

How a visit to the Indian countryside helped me realise the full extent of my luck.

Short Story by: Simonetta Gatto

Orissa Backlands, 1991

I was on a bus in the Orissa backlands, so far away from the one small town mentioned in my map that I had no exact notion of my geographical position. On my lap was Afrika, the small intrepid dog who followed me around the world, protecting our bags. Her paws were on the windowsill, and she was looking at the scenery with some interest, her head darting to and fro to follow this or that detail.

As far as I knew, the road went through and in between the various parts of a large Wildlife Sanctuary, though it was impossible to know when we were inside it because I never saw a gate or sign. Sometimes we were surrounded by a sparse broadleaf forest which might become impenetrable during the monsoon rains, and at others we moved within vast swathes of dry grassland interspersed with already harvested rice fields. Thickly forested hills beckoned in the distance, dirt roads snuck towards nowhere, temple spires rose above a few ancient villages, and apart from the odd truck, everyone moved on bicycles, bullock carts, or on foot. Many women didn't wear a corset, most men wore a dhoti, and a lot of children were practically naked.

The bus was basic and quite uncomfortable: barely padded wooden benches with no overhead trays where people squashed, holding all their belongings. Next to me was an old woman hugging a large cloth bundle, her face semi-covered with a piece of her sari, and a mother holding a crying child whose eyes were heavily lined with kohl. Behind was another baby who liked to pull my hair, and in front an old man who kept on spitting out of the window, though he gave the phlegm enough force for it to avoid being carried by the bus stream, and hit me.

We had a flat tyre, and parked by the side of the tree-lined road. Further ahead was a dhaba, a small roadside restaurant with a verandah up front. Everyone headed in that direction, and I followed.

The Mysteries of the Female Body

The dhaba was run by a Sikh man with a fabulously neat turban and an untidy, black and white beard, who spoke good English and was happy to meet a foreign woman with a small endearing dog. We chatted while I drank my chai, the two of us half-lying on charpoy rope beds separated by a wooden table.

He was particularly interested in Afrika and eventually asked if he could buy her, explaining that his children would look after her very well. I declined. He left the table, and reappeared holding a fan of notes. I laughed, declined once more, and tried to explain that we had already been together nine years during which we visited twenty-four countries—and there was no way I would leave her behind in the Indian back of beyond. He understood and muttered an apology with a purring, sympathetic voice.

I asked about his children, four, and then about his business, did it pay for their school? He wobbled his head in that strange mixture of yes and no, and told me about a room he rented to tired long-distance truck drivers. The idea of spending a few relaxing days watching rural people go by piqued my fancy, and I asked to see it.

We walked to the back of the restaurant towards a pretty little house with some flowers growing around it, and entered a large light-blue verandah containing another charpoy bed. Behind it was a whitewashed room filled with basic wooden furniture, and a toilet extension with a raised latrine and enough space for a bucket shower.

The verandah opened onto a patch of land overgrown with bushes, at the end of which was a white wall covered in some kind of graffiti. When I eventually walked up to it, I realised that it depicted a large penis drawn in minimal details, and the contours of a woman's hips, at the centre of which was a garbled mess. Obviously, the artist knew nothing about the anatomy behind pubic hair.

The Sikh gentleman told me about a monthly market happening two days later, and I decided to stay. He ordered a boy to change the bed sheets and give the room a good sweep, then sent another one to retrieve my bag. When he came back with it Afrika roared like an upset lion and darted towards his heels. The boy was so scared he fell backwards, and we all had a good laugh.

And that's how it all began, ten days of sitting on the dhaba's verandah doing very little except for short trips to a nearby village, walks within the boundaries of the national park, visits to the homes of local artists who were happy to show me their ancient craft, and an exhilarating day at the market where I ate red ants. At night, I used candles to update my diary, write letters, and read two of my thirteen books.

The Mysteries of the Female Body

Once awake I would take a pee, prepare my own Nescafé and fruit salad, lounge in bed to read and smoke, and then poo. Afterwards, I'd take a bucket shower and walk to the dhaba for a glass of chai.

On my eighth day, while crouching on the raised latrine, I heard a noise and looked up at the roof. Two of the tiles had been moved, and in their stead were many eyes now wide-open in shock. The roof rattled with the noise of running feet, and through the hole I now saw the sky.

Obviously, men had been climbing on it early in the morning, hoping to discover the mystery behind pubic hair, then waited for me to wake up. Since I often woke around 10, and heard the noises at daybreak, some of them had waited many hours for that one peak from above.

It was somewhat funny, but also terribly sad, especially considering the wealth of sexual information that had existed in India in the past. It made me think of how the splendours of the Roman Empire were followed by the Dark Ages, and felt a chill up my spine. Clearly, civilisation was not an upward curve but a series of zigzags made of constructive and destructive cycles, as every victory could turn into a defeat the next day. What is known today could be unknown tomorrow, and nothing in our so-called age of science and reason could be taken for granted. All our achievements in personal freedom, equality, democracy, and science could vanish without a trace if a bunch of bigots or prudes ended up in power, and enough people supported them.

Never an early sleeper, I used to wake up quite late, though I was often disturbed by some strange noises on the roof, which I thought were monkeys.

I felt blessed to be living in the present era, the first in which a simple woman like me could travel the world on her own. Yes, I got hassled and had to be far more careful than men, but there I was, doing exactly what I wanted to do. Deciding by myself what my destiny should be. How many in my female lineage had the same feeling of utter, unlimited freedom?

I spared the gentle Sikh owner the embarrassment of a complaint and left the next day.

Simonetta Gatto

She writes travel stories, mostly from the late 80s and 90s when she roamed the world in the company of her dog Afrika.

Together they visited thirty-five countries on three continents, returning to some several times over because of friends, bureaucratic requirements, or the desire to explore further.

Some of their adventures were extreme, others more mundane, but none were hurried, always taking our time to meet local people and learn something new. Together, they covered at least one and a half times the circumference of the earth.

KOCHI-
MUZIRIS
BIENNALE

Now at Pepper House, Jompet Kuswidananto's Ghost Ballad (2025) uncovers the haunting parallels between coastal music traditions in Kerala, Goa, and Java. The installation traces the lineage of melancholic genres like the Portuguese Fado and Java's Keroncong, exploring how colonial trauma and resilience are preserved through song. By mapping these sonic connections, Kuswidananto turns music into a living archive of our shared maritime history.

These musical forms carry a deep sense of longing, tied to historical experiences of migration and displacement. Through this evocative work, the artist examines how the "ghosts" of the past inhabit the present, bridging vast distances to tell a collective story of survival and memory.

Photo Series

KOCHI-
MUZIRIS
BIENNALE

KOCHI-
MUZIRIS
BIENNALE

LENS & LINES

Photograph by: Jayaraj T. P
Casual sketch by his daughter, Dhanasree T. J

Enjoy!

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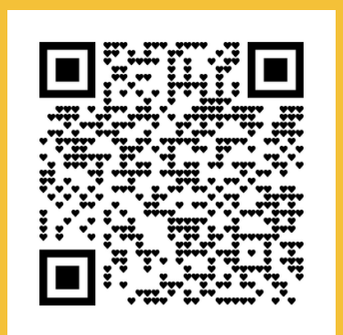
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